

# WRIT: Journal of First-Year Writing

---

Volume 2 | Issue 2

Article 3

---

8-12-2019

## Hamlet: The Grim Reaper

J. L. Williams

Bowling Green State University, [alemanj@bgsu.edu](mailto:alemanj@bgsu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/writ>



Part of the [Rhetoric Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Williams, J. L. (2019) "Hamlet: The Grim Reaper," *WRIT: Journal of First-Year Writing*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/writ/vol2/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ScholarWorks@BGSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in WRIT: Journal of First-Year Writing by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@BGSU.

---

## Hamlet: The Grim Reaper

### Cover Page Footnote

\*Publishing name is different from BGSU identification, I prefer J.L. Williams, thank you\*

## Hamlet: The Grim Reaper

By J. L. Williams

[alemanj@bgsu.edu](mailto:alemanj@bgsu.edu)

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* hosts the very eccentric and somewhat indecisive protagonist after which the play itself is named. The ever-famed climax of this story occurs during Hamlet's soliloquy: "To Be or Not to Be." After all the tragedy that has so recently occurred in the young man's life he is plagued with mourning and guilt, not even sure the endeavor of living is worth the trouble. This represents to a titillated crowd the size of his heart and yet the so morbid contemplation present within his being. The turmoil of this scene is a pristine example of logos and pathos otherwise known as the logical and emotional persuasion of one's audience. Examples of these literary devices are seen throughout, textually by what is written and contextually by the meaning beyond dialogue.

### Logos:

#### Textual Logos

We will begin picking apart "To Be or Not to Be" by locating evidence of logos using textual evidence. Our analyzation goes line by line, phrase by phrase from beginning to end. The very first line of the speech poses a question, demonstrating a very logical approach to the matter foremost at hand in Hamlet's mind. Shall I exist or fade away? A question asked without fear or hesitance. As Hamlet metaphorically begins to weigh the pros and cons of enduring, he states, "And by opposing [a sea of troubles i.e. life] end them. To die -- to sleep / no more; and by sleep to say we end" (Shakespeare). In this line our main character makes a logical connection between death and sleep, pointing out how the two closely relate. Startlingly to the crowd he is romanticizing death, hinting towards textual pathos but more so in the writer's mind a logos line. By the writer's mind we mean Shakespeare. As he writes these lines on behalf of Hamlet's character he is aiming to make a logical and yet still emotionally evoking assertion; the mark of a good playwright indeed. From this moment on he stays with the idea of "sleep" and famously says: "...perchance to dream..." (Shakespeare).

If sleep be death, then what are dreams? Hamlet refers to them as an afterlife. A very sensible metaphor and strong case for logos. A reasonable analogy to say that sleep is to death, as dreams are to an afterlife. He continues making a very good case philosophically for death, after all he said it best; "For who would bear the whips and scorns of time...when he himself might his quietus make with a bare bodkin?" (Shakespeare). At this point in the speech Hamlet is very puzzled,

surely others recognize this internal scorn. Through his eyes succumbing and making the ultimate sacrifice is a preferred choice over facing the struggles of a life on his Earth. Then realization hits, his problem-solving skills lead him to conclude that what may come after makes cowards of miserable men. A verdict reasonably argued. When played well this role, in this moment, makes Hamlet an advocate for the grim reaper himself and his gift of death. However, what makes a good play is what exists between memorized lines, the contextual evidence of logos and pathos. We will transition to contextual logos.

### **Contextual Logos**

Three main transitions can be seen within *Hamlet*'s "To Be or Not to Be," that is the transition from sleep to dreams and dreams to fear. After questioning the worth of living itself Hamlet reasons that most men choose to live only because they are more afraid of what comes after death than the pain they endure alive. This is the overall theme of contextual logos in this piece. A more concise understanding comes from analyzing the contextual logos present within each section. The first section covering the first to the ninth line ("Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep") argues an eternal slumber (Shakespeare). This is where one must carefully read between the lines to understand Hamlet's internal spark of conflict that ignited such a claim. Hamlet's point in such old English may remain unclear until we see the word "death." It is then we can go back in the text and realize that "fortune" and "troubles" both ironically represent life. The elephant in the room when reviewing this section from the introduction is Hamlet's sanity. In all his mourning he is still aware of the gift and at times (especially throughout this play) the torture of life and continues to logically compare the pros and cons of life and death. Though that fact also pertains to textual logos as it terrifies audiences, it is a very strong argument for contextual logos as well. For someone to pick and choose the best and worst parts of life as if it were a normal practice might be reasonably concerning. Not the mindset of a sane man, one would think. Hamlet and Shakespeare know like the rest of us that sleep and death carry drastic differences and is even rationalized textually in the first segment of this soliloquy. However, contextually the audience notices more of what makes the metaphor believable rather than preposterous. That is not only a brilliant and subtle example of contextual logos but a commendation to the brilliance of the play's author. Bow to you, Shakespeare. We almost missed it. How vital this assimilation is to the entire piece of "To Be or Not to Be", this is where the forlorn prince of Denmark begins to subconsciously persuade the audience of the validity of his suicide. We're held in suspense with the idea of death as a viable solution in our minds and slowly sinking hearts. But we're not done with contextual logos just yet.

In the soliloquy's body Hamlet shifts his thought process to dreams, which is a practical connection. Sleep are to dreams as wondering are to daydreams, and

Hamlet in this scene seems almost consumed in a daydream, chasing desperately his lucid thoughts in hopes of resolution. He appears to be entirely unaffected by the presence of his love, in true despair. This is a good point to make if death is like a long slumber, there must be dreams. Immediately this in his mind must be the catch, it's obvious really but only to him. We as an audience are for some time left in the dark unless we go back, read the context and not the script. He continues at determined pace, stating things such as: "For who would bear the whips and scorns of time, th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely, the pangs of dispriz'd love, the law's delay, the insolence of office..." (Shakespeare). We shall continue to rhetorically analyze his realization of why we do live on. After further wallowing in his despair comes a fateful "but." That "but" refers to the curiosity of what comes after the last beat of our drum. This is completely natural in all actuality. After all no one truly knows what awaits after the grave. It's the type of question a child might have in all its simplicity. This demonstrates to the audience the continued presence of Hamlet's working mind. He is not mad or bonkers, just remarkably grim. Many of us could face thanatophobia: fear of death. So, the answer whether to live or die is obvious to Hamlet which leads us to his appreciable conclusion regarding contextual logos. Death will come, but there is work to be done first.

His conclusion is said most memorably through his text, but analysis requires more depth. We begin searching this epic closing of a speech by figuring out what Hamlet truly means when he asks, "[afterlife] puzzles the will, and makes us rather bear those ills we have than fly to others we know not of?" (Shakespeare, n.d.), which is a question that must be asked before conclusion or the whole case is rubbish. Although there are many proofs for young Hamlet's claim and he has put up a very convincing fight with his own morals and in the minds of his observers. Hamlet continues having already answered his own question in his soul. Fear must be the only barrier to what he refers to as a "native hue of resolution" to which we "lose the name of action" (Shakespeare). After such a long quarrel with oneself he has made his conclusion, but we don't know of his final verdict on the debate until the end of the play which again demonstrates the awesomeness of Shakespeare's skill. Is he too afraid of death, or has he become one with the reaper? Perhaps we can know and foreshadow the prince's fate by rhetorically analyzing both textual and contextual pathos as we did logos. Let us find out.

**Pathos:****Textual Pathos**

If you are not yet convinced of the authenticity of Shakespeare's rhetorical weaving skills, let us explore even further by delving into pathos and noticing the links not yet aforementioned. Again, we will begin with textual evidence, which can be proved in just a couple of examples since it is so repetitively clear within this soliloquy and perhaps the easiest device to be seen in "To Be or Not to Be". After the initial question for which the soliloquy is titled Hamlet assigns nobility to both options of "suffer[ing] the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" or "tak[ing] arms against a sea of troubles" (Shakespeare). This sets the mood for the rest of the scene. The audience is left a little confused and curious. What burdens come with such fortune? It seems the better choice is to face one's troubles. That is until Hamlet further denounces the joy of life, reminding us all of what comes with it. There are incredible highs but expectedly there are immense struggles. Hamlet only focuses on this pessimistic point of view throwing us all for an emotional whirl. He sets the scene for even the grim reaper to be seen as a protagonist making the two characters so alike. From the opening lines on, Hamlet's perspective and emotional influence grows ever darker. Moving from the initial consideration of death, contemplation of life's scorns, fear of hell or no afterlife at all, to the conclusion of cowardice as an adjective for humanity. This speech overall is practically the definition of internal crisis. It would be hard for the audience as well to not feel a little panicked. This is because as people we show concern for others well-being, it is part of our moral code. On such a fragile subject the power rhetorical pathos wields is dangerous and truly invests the audience in the play, hanging on every word. The true essence of a fantastic tragedy originates in the writer's use of rhetoric and throughout this play our hearts and minds waver with Hamlet's.

**Contextual Pathos**

Last and possibly the most important evidence for contextual and textual evidence of rhetoric within just one scene of this tragedy comes contextual pathos. Language is beautiful, translatable, universal. Yet at times the expression of words is not nearly as strong as that of what our hearts project. This form of communication is never misunderstood and carries the gravity of the most suspenseful instances. So, imagine one's own turmoil when reacquainted with some of the most difficult feelings ever felt by man. We have all felt disappointed, betrayed, tricked. Hamlet refers to these heart sinking feelings as, "the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to" (Shakespeare), and almost instantly we can relate to what he is feeling. We are reminded of devastating moments within our own lives and are forced to compare with how the character must be feeling. It's almost as if Shakespeare couldn't possibly allow us to leave the theatre with an intact heart especially in the

case of poor, young Hamlet. Dozens of famous lines such as “the calamity of so long life” and “when we have shuffled off this mortal coil” (Shakespeare) immerse us in Hamlet’s grief, leading the audiences to believe that hell exists on Earth and that life is a chore; the pain so convincingly unbearable. But he drags the debate on as he must live, clouding the entire crowd with despair. To those of us who so unfortunately fall to questioning the worth of existence, this play is not one for the faint of heart. For as Hamlet says we are cowards, making the audience fall deeper with his heart, hesitant to dive. We build our case for saying goodbye, headset and ready next to Hamlet, then shy away trying to ignore such dastardly thoughts. Contextually, Shakespeare is doing more than relating us to Hamlet, he makes us feel the same defeat that he tortures his actors to perform. For if we feel defeated, if we all hear the same petrified heartbeat in the suspense of this moment, that is what allows for such a Shakespearean tragic finale. We begin to wonder which is the reaper, Hamlet or Shakespeare?

The twisted dance of logic and emotion raging battle within Hamlet has been analyzed by scholars' years and years over. Whether “To Be or Not to Be” is a masterpiece all around is left to one’s own consideration, but in the scope of rhetorical literature Shakespeare even in old English is able to make a feast out of only two analytical rhetoric components. This overwhelming evidence makes such a famous soliloquy an immaculate and arguable example of contextual and textual evidence throughout. Many can agree that Shakespeare is among literary pathos kings, but after thorough examination of text and meaning we see he was quite clever with logos as well. Well done, William, well done.

### References

Shakespeare, William. "Speech: 'To be, or not to be, that is the question.'" *Poetry Foundation*. Retrieved December 2018 from <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56965/speech-to-be-or-not-to-be-that-is-the-question>.